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## A Study of American Individualism: Taking *Friends* as an Example

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### Abstract

*Friends* are a famous American situation comedy since 1990s. It tells the story of six “common” youths living in New York of the United States including their emotion, career, joys and pains. Based on the study of *Friends* case, this article analyses the importance of American individualism to American culture, and tells us the reasons why individualism became the core of American culture. It also discusses the concrete embodiment of individualism value in American daily life from the life, career and feelings. This paper understands the importance of American individualism in American culture through current situations of American individualism. It helps us to understand deeply the impact and important significance on American culture which is caused by the American individualism. And helps us to better understand and look at the essence of American society and culture, understand the difference between USA and China. It also contributes a lot to promote cultural exchanges and common progresses between China and America and common progress.

**Key words:** Individualism; *Friends*; American cultural; American values

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### INTRODUCTION

*Friends* is a famous American sitcom which has been the biggest show since the 1990s. It tells the story of the

emotional, career and life ups and downs of six “ordinary” young people who lived in New York. It is said that the earliest implementation of the drama in China are some of the private nature of the English school, because several of the actors’ authentic American pronunciation of English learners, *Friends* is the best material to learn authentic American English which almost covers the most commonly used today’s America, like most oral expression, known as the “American spoken English dictionary” (Ye, 2006). However, the play is not just to help us improve American speaking and listening ability, and also a good way to understand American culture. The Sociologist Robert Bellach (1991, p.12) from the California University said that “individualism is the real core of American culture.” Professor Hu Wenzhong (p.31) pointed out, “do not understand the American individualism is impossible to understand the behavior of the Americans.” Individualism as an ideology penetrated into all aspects of American society today. The core idea of the play is the individualism.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

About individualism, there are a large number of investigations and study at home and abroad, all the research mainly divided into two parts, which are the historical development and the basic concept of individualism. Such as Robert Bellach and Steven Lukes, they are taking individualism as the main line to show the American society, their articles are indicating that people are the core doctrine of the United States, and the United States has a huge social impact. In China, researchers are mainly focuses on historical research methods, and are bases on historic and objectivity made interpretation to individualism, Ben Chen and other researchers mainly focuses on the founding of the United States as individualism born drawbacks and reasonable meaning, then transition to build on people-oriented

theoretical research and demonstration Harmonious society.

Nowadays lots of researches with plenty of books in literary, analyze the historical development of American individualism and the significance of the impact. But analysis actual performance of individualism from the view of film and television works is still relatively small. In this paper, taking the classic drama *Friends* as an example focuses on American individualism from life, career, and marriage and so on. We can understand American individualism more vividly and easier. Individualism can help us to know American culture, and can promote the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures.

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## 2. INDIVIDUALISM

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### 2.1 The Definition of Individualism

Individualism is a moral, political, and social philosophy; it says that private benefits should be the most important factor in the manner. Individualism emphasizes on individual freedom and personal importance, as well as “self-independence virtues”, “personal independence” (Steven, 2006). Western individualism is the essence of western culture. Professor Huntington of Harvard University once said: “Individualism is the most important value in the West, but it is the least important value in the world.” (p.48) This sentence is referring to individualism.

“Concise Encyclopedia Britannica” on “individualism” explanation is that:

A political and social philosophy attaches great importance to personal freedom, which widespread emphasizes self-governed, self-control, individual or self without external constraints. ... As a philosophy, individualism comprises a value system, the theory of human nature, a general attitude towards certain political, economic, social and religious behavior.

According to this understanding, individualistic is taking part in social life in the attitudes: Tendencies and beliefs, which have its historical inevitability performance. In other words, in the process of civilization in western society, individualism as a way of life, view of life and view of a world, they all have holistic and universal sense. Specifically, individualism permeates all aspects of social life in the West. It can be summarized as the performance of humanism on philosophy, democratic on politics, liberalism on economic and requirements of individual independent self-awareness on cultural and other content level.

### 2.2 The Development of American Individualism

#### 2.2.1 The Definition of American Individualism

American Individualism can express ideas of the United States. It comes from the rational principles of Puritanism, and from the pursuit of individual autonomy, it is a typical Western capitalist political and social philosophy. American philosopher Emerson is the first person to use the “individualism” in the English-speaking world, he

was big plus rendering and respected for individualism and think that will have benefit for personal development and progress of social, his point of view is “No political government is any breakable government”, it already penetrated into the Americans thought (Chen, 2012). Today, the US has become a typical representative of individualism, which is rooted in the early colonial and has been carried forward to self-reliance spirit in opening up the frontier’s period until now, and it has become an important part of the American spirit. American cultures have three pillars, which is spirit of Christ, liberalism and individualism. But the individualism represented basic model features of the American culture are the direct and real cover the whole American thought. American individualism has become the highest ideals, social ideals and view of the world. For Americans, individualism is equal to his life identity (Herbert, 1986). In the development of American culture, which became the starting point and destination of the American Mind, constitute the essence of American culture.

#### 2.2.2 Present Situation of American Individualism

Contemporary American individualism has two tendencies. First, the “extreme individualism”, the second is “sacred liberalism” which is recognized by American society now, its core is “everyone is equal in front of God” and then Freedom for all under the premise of respect for basic social life. In contemporary American, society as a super individual is given some sacred color to play a similar role of God in the mainstream society, which is reflected in: personal attention to maintaining mainstream social institution; personal attention to community life and the conclusion of legal family.

The essence of American individualism remains autonomy, self-determination and self-responsibility (Wang, 2009). The Bush administration proposed a \$700 billion bailout plan in 2008, in response to the outbreak of the financial crisis in the United States. This program was strongly opposed immediately, especially the American people. They think that the taxpayers should not pay the bill for the faults of the speculators in Wall Street. It was what they could not accept. The program was passed finally. It was the result of the concession that the government protected for the interests of the individuals. The people’s response is the US-based personal individualism, Personal supreme as well as the embodied individual centers. The program also reflects the typical American values of individualism: the relationship between individuals and overall; individuals are considered to be the starting points, the cores as well as the purpose; State and society should try its best to protect the rights and interest of the individuals (Emma, 1992).

The meanings and emphasis of the concept “individualism” have changed and developed with the economy and society of the United States. But the core content has always been acknowledged that everyone has

the right to choose their own way of life and no one can hinder them.

### 3. AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM IN FRIENDS

#### 3.1 American Individualism in Career

Six good friends have been successful in their career through their own efforts in the *Friends*. Rachel is considered to be the most noteworthy one. She was born in a wealthy family and she has lived in a comfortable life since she was a kind. After fleeing forced marriages, she decided to cut off his father's credit card at the encouragement of friends. She was full of courage to take the first step to have an independent life. Her first job was a waitress, although she was not good at this job. She also worked in some fashion companies to do image consultant, such as Fortunate and Bloomingdales. She has gradually found a direction of her life and she wants to go on it seriously. In the end, she became a talented manager and had a seat in the fashion field. She always has an unyielding spirit for all the things that Monica did. She had been engaged in catering service, such as a waiter, chef and food critic. She became a senior western chef at last just for the purpose of having a place in the restaurant. But all she had done changed the attitudes of her parents. Phoebe's experience was the most ups and downs; she had been a bucker, a driver, a secretary as well as a permanent masseur. Her work was not as successful as other friends, but she was always optimistic and independent. Joey was the typical of non-Cuban and non- big names actors. He had been keen to show and to fame. He had done a lot of part-time jobs in order to make a living, including the perfume spray test staff of the department store, advertising models, museum guide, etc. He did not give up his dream all the time and he finally became a soap opera star. Chandler had a good education. He was a manager of data department in a company. He became vice president of the company through the efforts. And he was a relatively stable one among the six people. Ross had the highest degree among the six people. He was a museum archaeologist, and he served as a university lecturer in the latter with stable income.

Despite the work differences of these six people, there is one thing in common: That is, they achieved the dreams in their hearts by relying on self hard working, and enjoyed it. Dreams are not distinguished by noble and lowly, the merits of the nature of their works did not affect their friendship during their relationship. That kind of equality, independence and mutual respect between friends should be advocated.

#### 3.2 American Individualism in Marriage

The very important feature of individualism is the emphasis on individual freedom and self-selection,

which was particularly prominent on the American concept of love and marriage. The attitude of Americans love to be open and frank. When you want to be with somebody, it is not necessary for you to consider a lot of other factors as long as you can feel happy such as family background, work, education and other objective factors. And if you do not love each other or feel unhappy in marriage, you can separate each other without considering the children as well as the influence from the society. The big point of view is the six friends' love experiences in *Friends*.

In the first episode of the first quarter, Monica told Rachel: "The real world sucks, but you will love it." She told all independent women, love and hate are always the most attractive in real world.

Americans are full of independence and autonomy before the formal marriage. They do not have any pressure from family and society. Because of this, the Americans once held a wedding ceremony and their family relationships are relatively stable.

In this play, Ross had an ex-wife, and she was living with her lesbian girlfriend, unexpectedly she found she was pregnant, and the baby belonged to Ross. The sought the views of Ross, and let him decide whether he would concern about the growth of the child. Although Ross was embarrassed with them together, he still had a sense of responsibility as a father, and to fulfill obligations seriously. Another thing was the emotional entanglements between him and Rachel throughout the whole drama. They experienced a lot, and they loved each other. They only wanted to have more dignity and hoped this feeling could be more perfect. The good news was they were eventually together. In addition to family responsibility, the loyalty between couples also eliminates a lot of Chinese people's attitude about the American life style of distortion and imagination (Sun, 2008).

The characters have changed many times during the play. There are many one-night stands, but we can find a point of view of Americans: It does not matter how many one-night stands it has, a person living together equally to be entrusted to a lifetime with each other. All of them seemed to have a strong sense of responsibility. Rachel's private life is very casual. But when she dated with Ross, she said to break up with him because of angry. They were very painful. Rachel thought the whole night, and decided to find Ross and apologize to her. But Ross thought that they really broke up, so he had an one-night stand with a laundry girl in anger. Although Rose had always stressed that he was in the case of breaking up after making "derailed", Rachel insisted that they did not break up. So Rachel cannot forgive Ross betrayal during their relationship subsisting. Thereafter, they cannot be together in six years. This shows that Americans are almost loyal to each other once they have built relationship with each other (Li, 2007).

No matter how everyone depend on their own wishes to make their own choices on the road of love, it is obvious in the play that everyone emphasizes on self-selection, gives full consideration to the feelings of others, and respects for the choices of others.

In the United States, men and women are more open to love. They can be together as long as they fall in love. In China, the love between men and women is mixed with many secular elements (Zhang, 2004). This phenomenon stems from the influence of traditional culture. The American culture emphasizes on individual characteristics and freedom. It is considered to be a kind of individualism society. Their goal is totally love when they choose lovers and they rarely consider external factors such as family circumstances. In addition, American tradition throughout the concept is survival in the competition and development. In order to have an invincible position in the competition, they are willing to innovate, eager to find multiple approaches to solve the problems. In addition, they are also willing to, take new jobs and do adventures. Men and women both have equal rights to date in love. They also date a lot of friends until they find the most suitable partner.

### 3.3 American Individualism in Family

Society is constituted by each family. There is no doubt that family relationship is one of the most important aspects of the culture. In the American concept, the relations between people are equal and independent, including between parents and children. American culture emphasizes respect for individual choices and pays attention to the development of personal independence. Americans always have had a sense of independence. This concept has penetrated into all areas of American life, work and ideology, especially family relationships. Six friends have their own work, and they do not live with their parents. They have their own space and they do not hinder the private life of each other. They rely on their own efforts on full economic independence in *Friends*. They have a completely independent personality and they rarely discuss with their parents on work, even a big event. They decide all their things by their own such as marriage. For example, when Chandler and Monica decided to get married with each other, he was hesitant whether to invite his parents to the ceremony or not. When Rachel found that she did not love her non-taste fiancé, she decided to flee forced marriages in the wedding, and chose to live with friends, rather than return to their family. It is considered to be inconceivable even unacceptable in Chinese family. Because of the personal economic independence, there is no hierarchy between elders and the young people in American families, which are obvious in the performance in *Friends*. Take Chandler's mother for an example. She was beautiful and stylish. When she was dealing with six people, she was considered to be the friends of the six

people rather than their elder. She even kissed Rose by accident. Parents and children can talk as friends on any topic.

## 4. THE INFLUENCE OF AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

### 4.1 The Influence of American Individualism in *Friends*

*Friends* helps us to understand better about the individualism of American culture. The people who live in collectivist cultures often think those who live in individualistic environment are selfish on some human behaviors. Individualism is the crystallization of Western history and traditional culture (Stephen, 2004). First, it is different with "individualism" under Chinese background. Individualism is the freedom of individuals. In other words, it is the independent status of individuals. It contains a self-struggle and progressive thinking. The "individualism" refers to the personal interests as the starting point.

Individualism is the core of American cultural values, which are deeply rooted in all areas of American life, work and ideology. Individualist values can be embodied in family, career, love, marriage, etc.. In *Friends*, the individualism can help us understand the substance behind the words and deeds of Americans as well as American culture in a better way. Through the analysis of the individualism of American culture, we understand the individualistic concept, nature, production and development as the core values of American culture. We can also see American individualism has a dual nature. It provides a powerful spiritual motivation and cultural orientation in pursuit of personal development. They rely on personal struggle to achieve their personal interests. They advocate equality, freedom, democracy and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and other positive connotations for the development of the whole American society.

Of course, it has ten seasons and as the hit TV series for the decade, it also contains a lot of American cultural beliefs and attitude of life. The individualism and values have been mentioned in the play for several times. In addition, we should have a view of the correct values of comprehensive individualism. We should also have the right attitude to Individualism Values rather than worship them blindly. American individualism has brought prosperity and progress to Americans. But if we do not control it to some extent, it will develop into egoism and cause serious damage to the society. It is based on the individualistic played a role in American history. The discussion on individualistic values in the play can help us understand better the American society and culture.

## 4.2 The Influence of American Individualism in Real World

American society has developed rapidly. The values of individualism and subject of spirit have played a major role in the promotion. Independent struggle of individualism and pioneering spirit are becoming the tone of American lives as well as the internal driving force for the development of the society (Tony, 1989). In addition, they are the huge impetus to the material and spiritual of the United States. American Individualism has an effect on politics as well as the society, in that it promotes the formation and development of modern American democracy.

With the development of American capitalism, Individualism has encouraged the people, educated the people, and mobilized the people's great spiritual strength. Also we continue to urge and improve the democratic political system of the United States. Individualism has an effect on American economy as well as the whole society, in that it promotes the great prosperity of the American society and economy (Ron & Suzanne, 2000).

Individualism is contributed to the Americans initiative, so that they have a strong fighting spirit, and a sense of competition and innovation. The development of the social and economic development in the United States has played a positive role in the promotion. Individualism has an effect on American society and culture, in that it promotes pluralistic and prosperous American culture (Yang & Zhang, 2007).

With the development of the society, individualism has gradually revealed its serious limitations as well. It even has become an important source of social conflicts. First, individualism leads to the free indulgence of social life. The hedonism prevails and the egoism expands. On the one hand, individual freedom has too much publicity and it forces people to only trust themselves and rely on their own. It will inevitably lead to the alienation between people because they will lack of communication and psychological harmony in reality. On the other hand, the development of extreme individualism helps the appearance of hedonism, money worship, egoism and other abnormal morphology in the United States (Larry & Richard, 2004). Then the individual interests are put above the top of everything. There is just a naked money relationship among people. The relationship among people is full of indifference without the slightest warmth. Hedonism still plays an important role in American life nowadays. Second, individualism led to a serious phenomenon of the division between the rich and the poor. Individualism is also caused considerable damage to the US economy. In fact, equal competition on the appearance caused the unfair wealth distribution among individuals in the United States. Unconditional glorification of free competition caused huge disparity of wealth in American society. Polarization of American

society is more intense than ever. Now, the United States has become the most polarized country in the west.

## CONCLUSION

The US has become a typical representative of individualism nowadays, which is rooted in the early colony and has been carried forward to self-reliance spirit in opening up the frontier's period until now (William, 2005). In addition, it has become an important part of the American spirit. American cultures have three pillars, which are the spirit of Christ, liberalism and individualism. But the individualism which represents the basic model features of the American culture is the direct and real cover of the whole American thought. American individualism has become the highest ideals, social ideals and view of the world. For Americans, individualism is equal to his life identity. In the development of American culture, which has become the starting point and destination of the American Mind, constitutes the essence of American culture.

The values of individualism stressed that the personal value can be realized ultimately by personal struggle, the self-design and pursuit of individuals. In other words, individual efforts play a decisive role in the changes of social status. In addition, individual efforts can also help to realize their dreams in life. This is what people often called "American Dream." The American Dream is a concentrated expression of the values of individualism. A lot of American presidents were born in poor families such as President Barack Obama. But they have struggled a lot with the spirit of selfness to achieve their successes step by step. Therefore, they have become the models of the "American Dream". Thus, American individualism is popular, right and proper in the American concept.

Individualism has a great ideological significance of symbolic slogan in American history, and it expresses the doctrine of natural rights, the freedom struggle of faith and "American Dream". In addition, it has brought prosperity and progress of the United States. In the early American history, Americans relied on the individualism power to develop the frontier, and created enormous material wealth for the United States. In the War of Independence, it mobilized the American people by the inspiration of the individualism slogan "liberty and equality". Therefore, this revolution has made great achievements (Li, 1998). The American individualism is still the driving force for people to move forward.

With the globalization of the society nowadays, the traditional culture has also been subjected to shock and impact from the foreign culture. In particular, the United States which is the world's largest developed country in the world has only the history of two hundred years. It has

become an economic power in a short period of time. Its unique culture has quickly penetrated into the world. We can see that people has slowly opened up in love and have more direct expression in China. The traditional Chinese culture and American culture are also converging (Xu, 2004). We cannot say which culture is better. The presence of each culture has its rationality, and the key lies in our attitude toward culture. We should determine our own cultural identity and position. We should have tolerance and acceptance for the subject in communication. In addition, we should have scientific analysis and comparison to structural model and constituent elements of their respective cultures systems, and maximize the absorption of the essence of foreign culture. We should adhere to national self-reliance, inherit and carry forward the essence of traditional Chinese culture. What's more, we should convert and reconstruct our culture critically and creatively with the combination of American culture to make the Chinese culture become an eternal blooming flower. Different civilizations and social systems should draw upon and benefit from each other to achieve common development.

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